The last words of Isaac de Castro Tartas (1623-1647)

Dear reader, 5 years ago I started writing Halakha of the day, and usually, once a week, I write about unknown Sephardic rabbis. This is the first time I write about the life of a Sephardic Jew who was not a rabbi (it is also the first time I write about someone so young, who died when he was only 24 years old). After reading, I hope you will understand why I was moved to pay tribute to this, unfortunately unknown, hero of Am Israel.

Isaac de Castro was born in the city of Tartas, in southwestern France, in 1623. His parents were from Portugal and belonged to one of the thousands of Jewish families that in 1497 were converted to Christianity "by decree", and since then practiced Judaism secretly for 3, 4 or more generations (it is estimated that in 1497 no less than 120,000 Jews lived in Portugal).

In Tartas, Isaac's name was Thomas Luis. In 1640 his family moved to Amsterdam where they finally were able to practice their religion openly. There, Thomas and his father were circumcised and changed their names to Hebrew names. Thomas was called from now, "Isaac de Castro". Castro (or Castro), surely the original surname of his family, was a typical Sephardic las name (see here the most famous Sefaradim named Castro). As an illustration we can mention rabbi Ya'aqob de Castro (1525-1610) of Portuguese origin, one of the most important rabbis of the Jewish community in Egypt.

Isaac began studying Judaism and medicine in the Netherlands. In 1642 or 1643 we find Isaac in Brazil. As explained last week, his uncle, Rabbi Moshe Refael Aguilar, came to Brazil to found a community in the city of Recife. At that time, Brazil was divided into two zones: one belonged to the Dutch and the other to the Portuguese. Recife was in the Dutch side. There, Isaac lived a completely Jewish life. Not only that but he was also dedicated to inspire hundreds (or thousands) of converts residing in Brazil to practice more openly their Judaism. While there were no courts of the Inquisition in Brazil, such as those that existed in Peru or Mexico, on the Portuguese

side there were many officer who watched that the “New Christians” -that is, Jews who were converted to Christianity more than a century ago- would no return to their religion.
No one knows exactly why, but the young Isaac left Recife and traveled south to the city of Salvador, capital of Bahia de los Santos, in Portuguese territory. There, Isaac was recognized by the local authorities. He tried to hide his Jewish practice but something gave him away: his tefillin.
Isaac was taken prisoner, accused not only of “Judaizing” but also of Jewish proselytism among the “new Christians”. He was extradited on a ship to Lisbon.
The Portuguese Inquisition first tried to persuade him to give up his Jewish faith and embrace Christianity. Isaac refused with very solid arguments, showing that Judaism is the true faith. Seeing that despite his short age he was a very knowledgeable man, the Inquisition sent its experts philosophers and theologians. But nothing and no one could persuade Isaac to renounce his faith.
For the first time in history, according to Miriam Bodian, a Jew used the following argument: *“I have the right to practice Judaism in light of a universal human law: freedom of conscience … an act performed in accordance with one’s conscience can not be judged guilty, and the act I do and I will continue to do – the act of professing the Jewish religion – is carried out according to the dictates of my own conscience. “* When the Inquisition saw that every effort was useless, it resorted to a last resource: public execution. The accused were sentenced to be burned alive in those cynically named “autos de fe” (acts of faith).
In December 15, 1647, when Isaac was only 24, he was taken to the public square, along with five other *conversos*, convicted of the same crime: Judaizing (judaizar).
The archives of the Portuguese Inquisition report that Isaac was left standing for several hours, near the fire, close enough to repent from his “great sin” (being a Jew) for fear of the fire. But Isaac resisted. And while being embraced by the flames, with his last breath, Isaac recited with a very loud voice **“Shema Israel HaShem Elokenu HaShem Ehad”.**
They say that the cry of Isaac caused an enormous impression on all those who had come to witness the public execution. Even the cruel executioners felt remorse for having taken the

life of such a young brave man. The Gentiles who witnessed the execution, for weeks did not talk about anything else. What’s more, the words of Isaac, the Shema Israel, had now become the symbol of freedom of conscience in Lisbon. And it inspired many converts to re-embrace their Jewish faith. Moreover, for several years the Gentiles repeated the words of the Shema … the Inquisition had to impose a severe punishment for anyone heard saying the Shema Israel, the last words of Isaac de Castro Tartas □”□□□□ .